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Behead the Small Fry?

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WASHINGTON — The measure of how quickly and pervasively hysteria over the Carter briefing book gripped this city's power centers was taken when one of the Republican Party's most respected senior counselors passed this word to his contacts at the White House: Off with their heads!

Easily recognizable severed heads would belong to Budget Director David Stockman, CIA Director William Casey and, most notably, White House Chief of Staff James A. Baker III. President Reagan, this seasoned Republican strategist advised, should avoid Richard Nixon's fate by beheading lieutenants. The advice was rejected, but the very fact it was tendered reflects the early-summer mood in Washington.

Although no evidence of any crime was in hand, the normal business of government at the White House was suspended by the revelation that candidate Ronald Reagan's staff had access to some of candidate Jimmy Carter's briefing material for their 1980 debate. As in other post-Watergate incidents, the cry of the Queen of Hearts was heard: "Off with her head! Sentence first, verdict afterwards."

Senior aides at the White House who followed the queen's approach in their advice to Reagan about Richard V. Allen, Anne Gorsuch Burford and Ray Donovan stand to lose their own heads in this case, and therefore are uncharacteristically judicious. Nevertheless, the incident shows how the Washington-based media can start slowly and end up as a headlong stampede, pounding at the gates of the White House.

THE FIRST two weeks of harping about the briefing book incident by ex-Carter aides Pat Caddell and Jody Powell went virtually unnoticed by the media. Caddell advised one prominent Democratic spokesman that he was going to open the issue on NBC's "Today" program and advised him to be ready for a deluge of reporters' inquiries; the party leader received not one telephone call.

The president's senior staff, nonchalant considering the early lack of media interest, were overwhelmed by what happened next. "I think we were all caught off guard," one of

Reagan's most politically astute advisers told us. With ABC's Sam Donaldson tenacious in pressing the story, his colleagues were pounding at the White House gates intent on not being left behind.

With the media pack in full cry, Republican strategists outside the White House began playing Queen of Hearts by urging that Reagan not duplicate Nixon's folly but get rid of his erring tacticians. One well-placed party operative passed word that Reagan could keep Baker, Stockman and Casey by quickly dispatching just one scapegoat: Communications Director David Gergen.

BAKER, STOCKMAN and Gergen were excused from Reagan's presence from that part of the briefing for his June 28 press conference that dealt with the Carter debate incident. But White House aides Edwin Meese and Michael Deaver strongly counseled the president not to condemn any aide on ethical grounds for receiving Carter campaign material, since that condemnation would have to be followed by their dismissal. Consequently, Reagan on six separate occasions during the press conference sidestepped ethical judgments about his senior staff.

Indeed, quite apart from any violation of the law, there is no evidence so far of any espionage operation carried on by upper levels of the Reagan campaign. It is the lower levels that cause concern at the White House. But what is expected at worst is interaction between the Reagan and Carter political operations in the gamy atmosphere that often prevails inside campaign staffs.

Although some Republican conservatives see intrinsic value in any problem that could get rid of Jim Baker and Dave Stockman, the Reagan White House's first confrontation with the media pack has brought close together the president's frequently feuding assistants. They are united at least temporarily in a common loathing for erstwhile friends in the news business and a common determination not to follow the Queen-of-Hearts solution prevailing in Washington so often since Watergate.